



The Closed Society and Its Friends: Plato's *Republic* and Lucas's *THX-1138*

It is not new to find utopian and dystopian elements combined in a single work. They appear in both an ancient text, *Plato's Republic* (dates from ca. 375 B.C.), as well as in a modern science fiction film classic, *THX-1138* (dir. George Lucas, 1971; based on an award-winning film school short subtitled *Electronic Labyrinth*).

The authoritarian "managerial meritocracy" proposed in Plato's utopian vision has been most severely criticized by Sir Karl Popper, a philosopher/political scientist who, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, considers Plato's state a closed, tribal, and magically-imposed society. The presentation here attempts to compare and contrast the classic treatise and the modern science fiction film in very broad terms. Our conclusion will draw on Popper's critique of Socrates's pupil.¹

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Although Plato in part echoes the Golden Age from the dawn of history that is described by his Greek predecessor, Hesiod, his concept of "civil society" remains today nevertheless a controversial Eden. It is a rather naive quest for a definition of justice that leads to an elaborate and revolutionary utopian construct. In the end, justice, it is decided, "consists in minding your own business and not interfering with other people" (Lee 204).

For Plato, a strife-free, interdependent, and communitarian society, however remarkable for its promulgation of happiness, would have no personal freedom or liberty as moderns might define these terms. Plato was openly critical of Athenians who were left too much to run their own lives, the result of which, he thought, was unhappiness and undiscipline. In this Ideal State, the leader is followed by the unquestioning faithful. Moreover, it is one man, one function: no "Jack of All Trades," no "Renaissance men" may exist here (Lee 152, 156-57).

Fearless and indomitable, Guardians of mettle and vitality rule and govern and protect the civil society (Lee 125); Auxiliaries execute their decisions. According to Plato's "magnificent," or "noble," or "handy lie," the Myth of the Metals, Guardians, like thoroughbreds, have gold in their veins; Auxiliaries have silver; and the rest are

made of bronze and iron (Lee 182 ff). Golden parents beget golden children, silver parents silver children, etc. Yet in this world, the family is abolished and replaced by the state. Eugenic breeding will ensure that the best men mate with the best women; procreation is regulated so to produce the best possible children for the society (Lee 240). With unified personalities, the "real pedigree herd" (Lee 240) will not be allowed to know their parents and thus will avoid any conflicting loyalties; they will love the state above all and consider all their peers brothers and sisters. Thus allegiance to the community will prevail.

Plato calls for a world in which any innovation in education is banned because it might lead to disorder (Lee 191); as in *THX-1138*, brain-washing indelibly imprints the brain (Lee 200). The wise, gifted and best-educated minority will control the less respectable majority, asserts Plato (Lee 202). But, alas, finally, the ideal pattern cannot exist, insists Plato, until "philosophers become rulers in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy come into the same hands . . ." (Lee 263). These are the lovers of knowledge whose eyes are raised up so high they usually step in it! Plato's Ideal State admits of no flaws, but the alert reader will find many reasons to reject life under the royal scepter of the Guardians.

Plato envisions the golden Guardians or philosopher-rulers in the allegorical underground cave as unchained; they must be educated so as to recognize the connectedness of all knowledge, the ideal Forms, and ultimately goodness itself. It is they who will be able to leave the cave, understand the realm of knowledge, and see and even be blinded by the sunlight; the shadows of the allegory represent what is assumed to be reality by the prisoners, but which the unchained prisoner/philosopher knows to be mere reflections. After his arduous journey to the sunlight above, the philosopher must also return to the cave and apply the knowledge he has gained.

That is, he must lead his fellow men from the realm of belief to that of knowledge—"out into the daylight." *THX-1138*'s concluding and dramatic escape to the sunlight above recalls this feature of *The Allegory of the Cave*.

The sexless, colorless, and drugged-out, post-holocaust society in *THX-1138* compares and contrasts very aptly with the so-called "Good Life" of "Justice" detailed in Plato's political tract. *The Republic*'s aristocratic, authoritarian, and potentially ruthless "Philosopher/Guardian/Kings" resemble the apparently "benevolent" leadership and especially the "auxiliaries" in *THX-1138*. In fact, Lucas's darkly pessimistic showcase work suggests a deep meditation on utopia/dystopia not unlike that proposed by Plato.

My comparison does not intend to show that Plato was a direct source or inspiration for Lucas. Rather, I hope to suggest, by my collocation, that Plato's classical text stands as a seminal work whose major themes remain perennial and current. Besides, it seems obvious that Lucas, at the time a twenty-three-year-old USC "movie brat," drew more directly on closer literary sources, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, not to mention important science fiction films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, H. G. Wells's *Things to Come*, Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and especially Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*.² Perhaps this is why the controversial and off-the-wall-film, now a cult classic, was stillborn at the box office.

"The Government Knows Best" may be said to characterize each work, however crudely. Living in the cave, the denizens of Plato's Ideal State believe in the truth of everything they see before them. Since they have never witnessed the sunlight, they find the artificial light and shadows "below" quite satisfactory for all their needs. In the film, Plato's cave has been abstracted into a bleak, post-apocalyptic, and computer-controlled subterranean state whose populace is permanently tranquilized through drugs. Even food is ingested through capsules.

Robert Duvall plays THX-1138, an androgynous anonymous worker (Plato's "craftsman") in a high-stress, robotics-enhanced nuclear center. Evidently, Winston's remark to his beloved Julia in Orwell's *1984*, "They can't get inside you" (137, 138) does not obtain in Lucas's *inferno*. Within this cold, artificial, loveless and plastic underworld of nightmarish wide-screen images and very peculiar sound montages, THX's cubicle partner, LUH 3417, begins to yearn for something human; like some latter-day typological Eve, first she, LUH, then he, THX, passes up the daily required drug sedation. They begin to feel the stirrings of sexual desire and start to care for each other—to feel, to want, to think on their own. This awakening to the responsibility of their human relationship leads first to "sin and crime," in Plato's words (Lee 242), that is, a normal human pregnancy, outlawed by the state. As Orwell's Winston quips to Julia, "'You're only a rebel from the waist downwards'" (129). Ironically, each Lucas character moves on at this point to a new spiritual and moral awareness, and when LUH is terminated, THX decides to attempt an escape. (In Lucas's view, love is necessary for human survival.) But then the machines close in to stop THX. Two-way TV screens set into the medicine chest determine that something is wrong. The hero is captured, tried, and convicted for "drug evasion and sexual perversion" (Pollock 91).

As Orwell wrote in his visionary work:

There was a direct, intimate connection between chastity and political orthodoxy. For how could the fear, the hatred, and the lunatic credulity which the Party needed in its members be kept at the right pitch except by bottling down some powerful instinct and using it as a driving force? The sex impulse was dangerous to the Party, and the Party had turned it to account (Orwell 111).

Thus, Big Brother bans love and sex because they lead to unnecessary complications; babies are genetic wonders, conceived scientifically through artificial insemination and raised by the state—similar also to the arrangements in Plato's ideal eugenic world, as well as Huxley's 1932 novel. Future generations are mere embryos manufactured in the laboratory.

THX-1138 is set, then, somewhere in the 25th century. Humanity has crept, in political terms, into a kind of sewer-like Gehenna, to live like repressed insects. In this stark, high-tech sterilized hive males and females alike—with zombie-like shaved heads and unisex white uniforms—have numbers but no individual identity; their drug-soothed catatonic stupor is pacified by OMM, an unemotional God whose philosophy is repeated *ad nauseam*, "'work hard, increase production, prevent accidents, and be happy'" (Pollock 90). Super-efficient, society's hardships or errors are either censored or monitored to eliminate "cost-overruns." Here the ritualized intercom dialogue sometimes conveys the impression of watching an existential foreign film with no subtitles (Sobchak 198).

Borrowing for his hero's sub-text both Huxley's John Savage and Orwell's Winston, Lucas's THX articulates a bitter, tense, and deep parable. However improvisational and austere the style, this "cosmic graffiti" offers an up-to-the-instant appreciation of the long-range dangers of increasing world dependence on technological marvels that ordinary citizens cannot fathom. The dehumanizing relationship between people and machines is underscored by the powerful visual graphics overlaid onto disembodied, alien, or garbled sounds. Of course, Lucas's craftsmanship is impeccable.

As in Plato's Spartan state, there is really no humor here: "'And surely,'" wrote the philosopher, "'we don't want our guardians to be too fond of laughter. . . . Indulgence in violent laughter commonly invites a violent reaction'" (Lee 144).

Escape from this restrictive environment takes up the last third of the narrative. As a prisoner in a kind of Kafkaesque White Limbo, THX suffers passionless experimentation: he is "jerked around like a spastic doll, tortured by electronic probes. . . ." (Pollock 94). What ensues beneath the visual (seemingly shot through a two-way mirror) is the doctors' banal chitchat, as if they were discussing not a fellow human's nerve reflexes but yesterday's tennis match or their new auto muffler.

This sadistic scene echoes an earlier sequence filled with brutal violence: THX sits calmly in his home watching two robot cops beating a man on the huge TV screen. Later, another visual echo follows when, during his imprisonment, THX himself is beaten bloody by auxiliaries—police with polished steel masks and heavy black nightsticks.³

Lucas's mind-bending vision of the future is haunting, yet the hero's decision to act leads to the achievement of freedom: he walks ". . . into the white infinity; he takes action and accepts its consequences, which can include death" (Pollock 94).

The concluding chase sequence in which the hero is pursued by robot cops leads to a final quixotic, if not paradoxical scene in which THX escapes "from the cave" to the upper world of blinding light, air, freedom—and total aloneness. To live is to hope. THX's dramatic flight from his surrealistic prison brings him to the open air of a new age, triumphant but still bewildered.⁴

Shot partly on location in the uncompleted tunnels of San Francisco's Bay Area Regional Transport system, the film uses an ultramodern, visually disturbing series of white-on-white sets and stainless-steel environments which brilliantly and semiotically communicate the numbing strangeness and isolation in this worst of all possible worlds.

Like that world, Plato's unchanging and decay-free republic will countenance, even promote, propaganda and censorship so that, for example, the production of stories is regulated. Deception is thus practiced for the greater good: "...falsehood is no use to the gods and only useful to men as a kind of medicine[.]; it's clearly a kind of medicine that should be entrusted to doctors and not to laymen."⁵ The implication is that the Guardians can and should administer, like healers or saviors, this type of medicine to the rest of us (cf. Popper 40, 138). In *THX*, the analogy is the hocus-pocus of religions, whose spellbinding royal leader, OMM, is represented in ubiquitous phone booth-like confessionals and whose soothing voice is emitted from a standardized tape recording. And OMM's robed, faceless monks match the android policeman, dumb, awkward, kindly, but as inhuman as Stormtroopers nonetheless.

When we are told something is being done by the government "for our own good," we moderns tend to resist. Any promotion or propaganda for the "Good Life" will eventually leave a bitter taste because our world has learned about totalitarianism the hard way. The modern critical and politically astute reader will doubtless see through Plato's panaceas for his heavenly city and perceive the ugly underbelly of one monomaniac trying to impose his uniform will on all of mankind. "Question Authority" quips the badge from the 1960s.

Our conclusion therefore follows Karl Popper's famous indictment of Plato's "Utopian social engineering," which would replace that majestic blueprint with what Popper calls "piecemeal social engineering" (Popper 22). His point is that a perfect state will not change or "participate in the general trend of historical development" (Popper 23). Plato wrongly identifies "liberty with lawlessness, freedom with license, and equality before the law with disorder" (Popper 42). Popper prefers leaders with initiative and originality, for from them will arise intellectual excellence; Plato's sovereigns, believing they can direct initiative, will exclude the rebels, the doubters, the resisters and select standardized mediocrities (Popper 134-35).

Accusing Plato of totalitarian immorality and outright racism (in the *Myth of Metaphysics* or "of the Blood and Soil"), Popper detects a clearly non-egalitarian, uncompromising, and falsely radical trend in Plato's political thinking (152 ff.). Plato's spell has "charmed all intellectuals with his brilliance, flattering and thrilling them by his demand that the learned should rule" (199). In contrast to the "Great Generation's" genuinely democratic open society delineated in Pericles's famous funeral oration, the closed society promotes a creed ". . .that the tribe is everything and the individual nothing."

(190). The tyranny of the tribe cannot replace individual, personal responsibility, which means "carrying the cross of being human," the cross of reason (200).

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Notes

¹ This paper represents a revised, expanded version of a talk at the *Literature/Film Quarterly Conference*, 9-11 June 1988. I am grateful to the organizers, Professors Thomas Erskine and James Welsh, for their generous encouragement and interest.

² Even a highly political film like Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, 1970, provides an interesting social contrast to THX, as suggested during the discussion of my presentation at the *Literature Film Quarterly Conference*.

³ 1971 was also the year of Kubrick's collaboration with Anthony Burgess on the graphically violent *A Clockwork Orange*.

⁴ THX's situation here—a sunset scene, I believe—is not unlike Antoine Doinel's final solitude at the ocean's edge in *Les 400 Coups*: he too is free at last, and utterly alone.

In another register, P. Vidal-Naquet (288-294) has brilliantly perceived in early Greek thought a tendency toward upward movement, harmony, and pure primitive Orphic-Pythagorean-vegetarianism, contrasting with a transcedental, downward association, decadence, and Cronos-like cannibalism.

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